

Picking Up the Threads:
Materializing Family Histories

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ABSTRACT

This research project explores family history, craft materials, and how Aboriginal women create meaning in the making of complex and beautiful functional objects such as Pow-wow regalia and quilts. I reference the history and evolution of regalia, beadwork and Aboriginal quilts as a means of examining hybridity as it relates to material and cultural forms. As part of my methodology, hybridity and authenticity will be discussed in relation to Homi Bhaba, James Clifford and Robert Young. Brian Jungen's use of mass-produced commodities in his work and Faith Ringgold's "story quilts" are examined in the context of my material practice. I examine Lori Blondeau and Sherman Alexie's critical use of humour and pop culture to explore Aboriginal self-identity. Feminist examinations of textile practices are related to quilting and handicrafts. My own experience of motherhood and its impact on my art practice is detailed. Drawing from archival research and oral histories my own family history is threaded throughout the thesis as I recover lost histories and knowledge.

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DEDICATION

For Ethan Mateo

Culture and Identity are in a constant state of flux; new forms created today are becoming the culture of our grandchildren-hybridized, infused and mixed with older 'traditions'. We continue to shift, grow and change. Whether the influences are hip hop or country music, the roots of the expression go back to cultural story, indigenous language, land and rights, and the spirit of our ancestors.

Tania Willard, Beat Nation, 2010.

Chapter 1 Introduction

I was 14 at the time of the treaty. I was taking care of my younger brothers and sisters as my mother had died. Our father was dead also. The people at the time were told to do anything to make a livelihood. I was a Métis until I married, then I became a treaty. I was 17 when I took a husband. My father had a land title to which I am supposed to have possession but I never bothered.

The life was easier then. Today, you have to pay for everything and it is hard. There ain't much I can tell you since my ancestors were more concerned with their livelihood and never told me much.

Julienne Courtoreille, aged 87. 1972.

These words spoken by my great-kokum (grandmother) elicit complex emotions and responses. In 1972 she gave an interview relating what she remembered about Treaty Number Eight. The treaty was signed in 1899 and covers most of northern Alberta and some parts of northeast British Columbia and it includes the Swan River reserve where my mother's family is from. Until I showed my mom this interview she did not know that my great-kokum was a

Métis, with no rights and no land. When she married she became a Treaty Status Indian¹, gaining some rights and some land. My great-kokum made moccasins, she tanned the skins and crafted them by hand. Some people remember her doing beadwork, some people don't. Nobody saved any of her moccasins or beadwork. When her kokum died my mother kept her cast-iron pot and a wool blanket. When my kokum died I kept her beaded rosary. My mom always told me that my moosum (grandfather) signed away his Treaty rights, gave up his Indian Status, became enfranchised, and became a Canadian citizen. He did this so his children would not be taken from him and sent to Residential school. The year was 1944. His record of Enfranchisement on the Library and Archives Canada Database (www.collectionscanada.gc.ca) lists him as J.M. (Jean-Marie) Sowan. To all who knew him he was Sam Sound. My mom says he would always tell her his name was also Jean-Marie and the Indian agent changed his last name to Sound.

Though archival research and oral stories “validate” my family history, a sense of loss and disconnection has, and continues, to resonate throughout my practice and my research. During my undergraduate studio work I began to explore my Aboriginal identity in drawings and paintings often focusing on my own family. I began to make interventions using family snapshots, found objects and written text to highlight the invisibility of Aboriginal people in a contemporary

¹ Aboriginal, Native and First Nations will be used interchangeably throughout this paper. Whenever possible, if a writer or artist is Aboriginal, I will use their specific tribal affiliation. The term “Indian” will only be used if the writer I am referencing uses it.

urban context. In several pieces I placed myself in the work in an attempt to subvert or question the stereotypes of Aboriginal representation and my own “authenticity”. Cynthia Chavez Lamar explains that “Native cultural authenticity is typically linked to ideas about physical appearance and blood quantum requirements” (5). I am considered too pale to be Aboriginal and often am asked to clarify my ancestry, my hybridity, my authenticity. My mother is Cree and my father is Métis and French/Irish. My mother, Elizabeth Perich, is my maternal aunt and raised me from birth and I did not have any contact or knowledge of my biological father or his family. My biological mother, Theresa Sound, often featured in my previous work as I attempted to make a connection to her through her image. In a piece titled *Self-portrait as my mother Theresa Joan Sound 1956-1987* (figure1) I had myself photographed as her in a re-enactment of a photo booth portrait taken when she was about sixteen.



Fig.1: Michelle Sound Perich, *Self-portrait as my mother Theresa Joan Sound 1956-1987*, 2001. Each photo 1"x 1 ½". Used by permission of the artist.

I was often struck by my physical similarity to her and a longing to know who she was. Through my practice I struggled to comprehend what larger societal factors would have contributed to her death from alcoholism at the age of thirty.

Three weeks before I turned thirty I gave birth to my son and this made me feel even more alienated from my mother and her life. I fully realized how young she was when she died and that she would never see any of her grandchildren. Later that year I finally connected with my father's family. I began to learn about my lost heritage, that my father's family is related to Chief Big Bear² and that they are Métis and French/Irish. The discovery of my ancestry has encouraged me to learn more about Métis art forms and the influence of Irish and French settlers on traditional indigenous art forms. The loss of personal and cultural connections and histories are what continue to inform my current practice.

In order to understand my practice and the ideas that inform it, this thesis explores my personal experiences and stories as well as postcolonial theories of hybridity and ambivalence. As part of my methodology the postcolonial writings of Homi Bhabha, James Clifford and Robert Young are investigated as they relate

² Big Bear was a Cree chief who refused to sign Treaty No. 6. He made alliances with surrounding Aboriginal bands and attempted to have all their reserves beside each other. The Government refused as it would have created a large Aboriginal territory. During the 1885 Métis rebellion some of his warriors killed Anglo-settlers at Frog Lake. Big Bear did not participate, and had tried to prevent the murders, but was sentenced to three years in prison. For more information see Rudy Wiebe, *Big Bear*, 2008

to my own practice. My current work references the history and evolution of beadwork, regalia and Aboriginal quilts as a means of examining hybridity as it relates to material and cultural forms. I draw on the writing of Racette and Alexie to further explore the importance of Aboriginal women's material creations.

To contextualize my practice, I look to contemporary artists, Brian Jungen and Lori Blondeau, both of whom have also explored their Aboriginal heritage in their work. Since my practice has moved from a photographic and performative art practice, I look at Faith Ringgold's "story quilts" in the context of quilting and cultural connections. More generally, feminist examinations of textile practices specifically quilting and handicrafts are explored in the context of my work.

Motherhood and my own family history have informed my practice in deeply significant ways. Drawing from archival research and oral histories my personal history and experiences are threaded throughout this thesis as I recover lost histories and knowledge.

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Chapter 2 Dances with Care Bears

In the fall of 2009 when I began the Master of Applied Art program at Emily Carr University I was interested in researching the complex history of trade between First Nations and Anglo-settlers. My work was informed by and referenced traditional Aboriginal imagery and practices and I began researching the history of beadwork and Pow-wow regalia. I began making sketches and paintings of abstracted beadwork designs. I was interested in how beadwork, using glass or plastic beads, is viewed as a quintessentially Aboriginal artwork but is a non- indigenous European trade item. During the nineteenth century Indigenous materials such as porcupine quills and shells were replaced with glass beads and geometric designs were changed to floral motifs. Because of its complex history beadwork is still a form of language and storytelling in that it conveys and consolidates identity. Racette points out that “one of the marks of a vibrant art tradition is continued innovation and creativity” (Looking 302).

I produced a photo collage of floral beadwork designs that were arranged to spell out the Cree word “Atamewak” which translates to “trade” or “they are buying from them”. I felt that my work was often too focused on either my own personal history or Aboriginal history and I wanted to challenge myself to represent present day realities that did not visually represent myself or my family.

I wanted to shift my focus to contemporary examples of Aboriginal material culture that was clearly recognizable and continued a history of innovation and hybridization. As a child I often went to Pow-wows and contemporary regalia made of shiny, bright colours and sometimes even cartoon characters came to mind. Regarding the use of non-indigenous images on regalia Cree writer Richard William Hill states “what some see as commercial contamination is a brilliant appropriation where an image has been repurposed and a tradition has found new territory in which to live and grow” (10). As a contemporary First Nations’ cultural movement the Pow-wow is a venue for cultural expression and celebration. It is a combination of the ceremonial and the secular. Although Pow-wow performances feature traditional dances and are a part of spiritual ceremonies; including preparations for war, healing rituals, or victory celebrations, current Pow-wow dances have changed with the times. Regalia has become more flamboyant and colourful as it is important to attract attention when dancers compete for prizes (Valaskakis 153-55).

In a contemporary context regalia reflects complex social changes and evolution within Aboriginal culture. The past several decades mark a shift from traditional Pow-wow regalia made from animal hides to the use of synthetic cloth and the incorporation of pop images. Contemporary Pow-wow regalia is a continuation of a long history of appropriation and innovation within Aboriginal communities. Art historian Ruth Phillips argues that Aboriginal clothing after European contact should be considered as the “materialization of negotiation and

inventions that occurred in the process of its fabrication” (Phillips 606). Through my practice I seek to understand how traditional knowledges are negotiated and transformed in contemporary forms such as regalia.

My practice is fueled by an interest in playful contradictions and fusions rather than in the imposed cultural binaries, discussed below, that do not reflect my experiences. When I decided to work with the materials and imagery from Pow-wow regalia I wanted to combine them with a stereotypical Aboriginal consumer item. I chose to work with dreamcatchers as they are also a handicraft traditionally made by Aboriginal women. Dreamcatchers are believed to have originated with the Ojibway Nation, and they were adopted in 1960-70s as a symbol of pan-Indian unity across North America. However, they have recently been derided as "tacky" and over-commercialized, especially as most of them are being manufactured and sold by non-Natives. Traditionally dreamcatchers were crafted by tying sinew strands in a web around a small round or tear-shaped frame of willow and hung above the bed to protect sleeping children from nightmares. The bad dreams become trapped in the web and only the good dreams filter through and are remembered in the morning.

I decided to make dreamcatchers not only to critique and emphasize the tacky and over-commercialized aspect but also to create hybrid objects to comment on the continued incorporation of new materials within Aboriginal communities. The ubiquitous and highly commercialized dreamcatchers are

made in China and sold in dollar stores. Alternatively, they are crafted by First Nations and sold at Pow-wows. My series of dreamcatchers and spirit shields highlights the commercialization and pushes it into mockery with its' excessive "bigger is better" gaudiness.

In the spring of 2010 I began to create *Dances with Care Bears* (figure 2) large scale, oversized dreamcatchers made from various sized hula hoops that are wrapped with bright ribbon and artificial fur. The dreamcatcher web is made from synthetic thread or yarn and strung with plastic beads. For the 'spirit shields' I attached to a hoop a circle of fabric printed with cartoon characters; the Care Bears, or Disney princesses; Snow White, Belle, Sleeping Beauty, Ariel the little mermaid, and Cinderella, reminiscent of the materials in contemporary regalia. Attached to the bottom of the hoop are ribbons decorated with bright plastic beads and feathers.



Fig.2: Michelle Sound Perich, *Dances with Care Bears*, 2010. Installation view. Dimensions variable. Photo: by artist. Used by permission of the artist.

For the December 2010 group exhibition *Sparkle and Spin* I constructed two dreamcatcher style hanging pieces from a black metal wreath shape (figure 3). This Ikea Christmas decoration was covered in white LED lights and I attached brightly coloured ribbons strung with plastic beads and feathers to the bottom half. Secwepemc artist and curator Tania Willard affirms;

Our ancestors must be dancing for us. To see our
culture thrive and survive they must be dancing to our
beats. Like the beats of our sacred drums, we echo
our ancestors in the expression of culture regardless
of medium, whether electronic beats or skins, natural
pigments or neon spray cans, beads or bling,
breakdancing or round dancing: we do it as an
expression of who we are as indigenous peoples (7).

My series *Dances with Care Bears* is part of this contemporary expression which continues a long history of Aboriginal artistic adaptation and innovation. Richard William Hill observes that Aboriginal artists playfully confront the seeming disjunction between present-day and “traditional” materials (9). My work continues the use of new images and materials to comment on the contemporary and complex world we live in.



Figure: 3. Michelle Sound Perich, *Sparkle and Spin* Installation View. 2010. Mixed Media, Dimensions Variable. Photo: Karen Garret De Luna. Used by permission of the artist.

Chapter 3 Hybrids

The use of new media and imagery within Aboriginal communities is a visual representation of the ambivalent experience of Aboriginals regarding Anglo-settler culture. Ambivalence is defined as “the coexistence within an individual of positive and negative feelings toward the same person, object, or action, simultaneously drawing him or her in opposite directions” (Merriam-Webster). Cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha further describes ambivalence as a complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The relationship is ambivalent because the colonized subject is never completely opposed to the colonizer and that complicity and resistance exist simultaneously within the colonized subject (41-2).

Ambivalence can be seen in the use of new materials, techniques, and images for traditional arts. It is further seen in the appropriation of Anglo-Settler quilts that have gained new meanings within Aboriginal communities and often became symbols of status. The use of new materials reflects creativity and innovation but often signals a loss of indigenous media and techniques. Métis artist and writer Sherry Farrell Racette highlights the importance Aboriginal women played in the creation of material culture “Women’s artistic work gives evidence to the critical role they played in integrating new materials and ideas...” (285). She argues that Aboriginal “material culture is an artistic record of media and technique, these objects are encoded with knowledge, they are the raw

material of women's history" (285). This seeming complicity was also a form of resistance as it allowed artistic traditions to continue and often provided economic survival.

Arts identified with women have often been neglected as much of the art is considered craft and not the traditional male-dominated "fine art" such as sculpture, painting and drawing. There are several female artists whose work has had an impact on my own, however there is not a lot of literature about these artists as their practice is considered craft based. For example Cree artist Ruth Cuthand's 2008 series *Trading* consists of mixed media works that depict viruses and disease in beadwork. Despite being recently acquired by the MacKenzie Art Gallery I could only find one article about this piece. My research concerning beadwork and trade is directly related to Cuthand's own investigation. She states that "the series examines both sides of European trade, which brought new items that revolutionized Aboriginal life [...] the downside was the decimation of many tribes through disease, which quickly spread, arriving even before Europeans" (Robertson). Cuthand's work is an example related to Cherokee writer and curator Rayna Green observation that "Native artists often acknowledge and critique in visual representation, the tragedies, cultural hybrids, fusions, and cultural collisions common to their history in North America" (12). The work of Aboriginal artists, particularly women, often reflects and explores the themes of ambivalence and hybridity.

Post colonial theorist Robert Young writes that the idea of hybridity developed out of the field of biology to define the offspring of two different, but related animals. The word was later used in the 19th century as an argument against miscegenation between African slaves and their owners of European descent and other “mixed race” peoples. The term has also been used to describe objects and cultural practices exhibiting signs of both Euro-American and indigenous communities (158-9). Hybridity commonly refers to the emergence of new cultural forms from multiculturalism within the contact zone produced by colonization. Bhabha’s analysis of colonial relations stresses the interdependence and mutual construction of both subjectivities (42-3). While I acknowledge that the word has negative connotations, I will continue to use it throughout this thesis as I have not found an alternative that best describes my experience as a mixed race Aboriginal or the fusions and “mash ups” present in my art practice.

Cultural theorist Bill Ashcroft states that “the colonial hybrid is an articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted on the site of desire” (137). He further explains that hybridity allows a means of evading the continuation of the binary categories of the past and develops new anti-monolithic models of cultural exchange and growth. Ashcroft further states:

hybridity has sometimes been misinterpreted as
indicating something that denies the traditions from
which it springs, or as alternative and absolute

category to which all post-colonial forms inevitably subscribe, but [...] is not predicated upon the idea of the disappearance of independent cultural traditions but rather on their continual and mutual development (138).

Certainly this is evident in the shifts in the material production within Aboriginal communities.

The use of new materials and motifs, plastic buttons instead of shells, beadwork for quillwork, cloth and blankets for hides, is in fact innovation and adaptation and not a loss of authenticity. There are numerous historical examples where European products were modified and used for their aesthetic qualities, and Aboriginal artist Brian Jungen questions why in Northwest Coast art “this component of history is not 'revived' in today's carving and regalia” (Augaitis 20). Richard William Hill cites Cherokee artist Jimmie Durham who has noted that this notion of authenticity is ultimately a way of keeping Aboriginal people in their place and out of the larger world. This process is expedited when we internalize this external discourse of authenticity and begin to regulate our own identities accordingly (9).

The authenticity of both the maker and the art piece are questioned and needed to be validated or accepted. Aboriginal artists have always had to explain their lineage and ancestry. Aboriginal curator Cynthia Chavez Lamar states in *Art in Our Lives; Native Women Artists in Dialogue* that “...artists with mixed heritage felt their identities being defined by rigid ideas of authentic Native identity...” (Lamar 5). From a personal standpoint, I have explored the reactions to and expectations of my own ancestry within my own work. I further question the idea of authenticity in a larger context in my current work *Dances with Care Bears*. Are dreamcatchers considered authentic when they are made in China or when an Aboriginal person uses non-indigenous synthetic materials?

Historically there has been an emphasis on pre-contact traditional art forms that attempt to keep artists and Aboriginal art forms in the past. Contemporary Aboriginal artists frequently critique this imposed authenticity to challenge stereotypes that do not reflect their experiences. Anthropologist James Clifford argues in *Indigenous Articulations* that “authenticity is secondary” (182). Articulation theory and hybridity are challenges to the relationship between inauthenticity and the loss of tradition, because it recognizes that inventiveness is a normal process of cultural continuity. As Clifford points out, since indigenous cultures have been disrupted and assaulted it is important that “communities can and must reconfigure themselves, drawing selectively on remembered parts” (182). He further argues that concepts of authenticity and tradition are the source of culture-making processes as “what is at stake is the power to define

tradition and authenticity, to determine the relationships through which native identity is negotiated in a changing world” (183). Perceptions of authenticity and tradition in Aboriginal art have been imposed from the outside, but it is the artistic producers that should have the authority to define what is authentic.

Chapter 4 Humour

Humour is the language through which many Native artists communicate and criticize, often juxtaposing the most culturally compelling of the tiresome “Indian” images with the most mainstream and popular icons to create a layered and complex commentary. In her essay, *Teasing, Tolerating, Teaching*, Métis writer Kristina Fagen suggests that First Nations writers (and artists) use humour to “subvert white society and to counter colonization and stereotypes” (24). Humour offers a sense of relief and an acceptance of circumstances in the face of threat or disaster and is utilized to deal with tragedy within Aboriginal culture. Stories and jokes allow people to reach their own conclusions and see different possible meanings, in a non-confrontational or didactic way. Humour can often strip away the assumptions and stereotypes more effectively than by any other means. Mimicry and mockery as described by Babha is an aspect of humour that is utilized by Aboriginal artists. Babha writes that colonialism wants the colonized subject to reproduce the assumptions, habits, and values-to ‘mimic’ the colonizer; instead it produces ambivalent subjects whose mimicry is never very far from mockery. The relationship between mockery and mimicry, the ambivalent, is fundamentally unsettling to colonial dominance (41).

While humour is not applicable in all of my work I use it as a strategy similar to the work of Cree artist Lori Blondeau. She utilizes humor to critique mainstream representations and stereotypes of aboriginal women. Her practice

differs from my own as she is a performance artist who often creates characters like Belle Sauvage and the lonely surfer squaw, but similar to my work she explores the influence of popular culture on “Aboriginal self-identity, self-image and self-definition” (Budney 28).

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Fig.4: Lori Blondeau, *Lonely Surfer Squaw*, 1997. C-print.

In her photograph *Lonely Surfer Squaw*, (figure 4) she stands in the snow wearing a fur bikini, holding a pink surfboard. She plays with Hollywood images of female beauty and stereotypes of Aboriginal women as ‘squaw’ or ‘Indian princess’. I find that I am drawn to Blondeau’s amusing use of materials and colours, such as a fur bikini and a pink surfboard, juxtaposed with landscape and non-functional objects. The Cree language has two categories of objects: “oseechigun”, that which is created and “apucheechigun”, that which is useful. My work plays with the idea of objects that are created and those which are useful. *Dances with Care Bears* explores a similar aesthetic and amusement in the absurdity of objects such as the large dreamcatchers hanging in a window or surfing in freezing temperatures in a fur bikini.

Blondeau reminds us that parody can be a powerful force for challenging and disempowering the inherited violence embedded in Western ways of

knowing the world (51). In relation to Blondeau's work art historian Lynne Bell cites Dwight Conquergood who states the importance of "the carnivalesque over the canonical, the transformative over the normative, and the mobile over the monumental" (Bell 53). In Blondeau's *Lonely Surfer Squaw*, the insensitive and marketed images of Indians and women converge in order to redeem both (Green 14). Her use of pop culture imagery demonstrates what Rayna Green describes as native artists not "living between two worlds" but instead they are "multi-vocal and multi-culturally literate" (14). When Aboriginal artists use pop culture it is a part of the culture they are already raised in and are as familiar with them as their own traditions, sometimes even more so. Bell argues that Blondeau's work addresses the continuing imperialism of present-day popular culture while "imagination consorts with pleasure in her practice, but also with grief, mourning, (and) pride..." (19). The use of humour to address grief is also significant in the work of Sherman Alexie.

Resistance, usurping of authority and humour are all employed in the writings of Spokane/Coeur d'Alene author Sherman Alexie. His short story *What You Pawn I Will Redeem* tells the story of Jackson Jackson a homeless "Indian" living in Seattle. He walks in and tells the owner that his grandmothers Pow-wow regalia is in the pawnshop window. He tells the owner that it was stolen fifty years ago and he can prove it was hers because she always added one yellow bead where it did not belong. The pawnshop dealer tells him he can't just hand the regalia back to Jackson because he paid one thousand dollars for it, but to be fair

he will sell it to him for nine hundred and ninety nine. For the next twenty four hours Jackson has a series of misadventures trying to get the money, and thinks often of his grandmother.

One exchange between Jackson and three homeless Aleuts begins with Jackson longing for his grandmother;

I thought about my grandmother, I'd never seen her
dance in her regalia. And more than anything, I
wished I'd seen her dance at a Pow-wow.

"Do you guys know any songs?" I asked the Aleuts.

"I know all of Hank Williams," the elder Aleut said.

"How about any Indian songs?"

"Hank Williams is Indian."

"How about sacred songs?"

"Hank Williams is sacred."

"I'm talking about the ceremonial songs. You know,
religious ones. The songs you sing back home when
you're wishing and hoping."

"What are you wishing and hoping for?"

"I'm wishing my grandmother was still alive."

"Every song I know is about that." (515-16).

Alexie uses humour throughout this dialogue and yet captures a sense of loss. Similar to some of my work, which is discussed below, Alexie expresses the importance of material culture to family and cultural connections.

Jackson explains that his grandmother always added the out of place yellow bead “because they (artists) don’t want to be perfect, because only God is perfect, Indian people sew flaws into their powwow regalia” (501). The concept of having flaws within artwork appeals to me as I am not concerned with the perfection or mastery of a technique. This idea is also echoed by artist Ruth Cuthand who states, “I just don’t practice the European ideal of perfecting the one thing. It doesn’t apply to me. I guess I’m A.D.D. or curious. I need to learn new skills so I’m never bored” (Robertson). I am interested in learning new skills and experimenting with new materials that are not confined to the studio but also becomes a part of my daily life.

Chapter 5 Materials and Motherhood

Tourist souvenirs, advertising and Hollywood Films, often portray Aboriginals as images to be consumed and not as consumers themselves. My work involves the gathering of many materials, and unlike my great kokum who would have gathered and transformed natural materials from near her home, I gather from the mall. Dunne-Za and Swiss artist Brian Jungen's work influences my own practice as he also uses mass-produced objects in creating recognizable First Nations forms and commodities. Comanche curator Paul Chaat Smith notes in his essay *Money Changes Everything* that Jungen is not using 'found' objects, rather, he is shopping; "Jungen simply buys what he needs, in the same way and at the same stores that you and I frequent" (6). In his series *Prototypes for a New Understanding* (figure 5) Jungen recrafts disassembled Nike Air Jordan's into sculptural objects evocative of the ceremonial masks of the Northwest coast First Nations. The traditional masks serve a ceremonial purpose within Aboriginal communities and have a long history as a trade item for collectors and tourists that emphasize how First Nations' art is exoticized and commercialized. Jungen mobilizes aesthetic cultural misunderstandings that politicize cultural stereotypes in the age of globalization and "the way globalization has enticed non-western subjects to commodify their cultural identity" (Augaitis 30).

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure: 5. Brian Jungen. *Prototype for New Understanding #11*, 2002. Nike Air Jordans, hair. 26 ½" × 23" × 10".

While Jungen's work is influential in relation to my material practice his work doesn't really address the aesthetics and materials I rely on in relation to my position as a woman and mother. I have been exploring and researching feminist art practices in terms of aesthetics, textiles, and under valued work. Feminist art critic Lucy Lippard's 1978 essay *Making Something from Nothing* discusses the use of "how-to" hobby books and women's desire to change and adorn the physical space she is often isolated in, the home.

The hobby books reflect the manner in which Good Taste is still unarguably set forth by the class system. Different books are clearly aimed at different tastes, aspirations, educational levels [...] working class women are "presumed to respond to such (garish)

colours and to have no aesthetic appreciation of the
'intrinsic' superiority of natural materials over artificial
ones, not to mention an inability to afford them (135).

In my practice I am interested in subverting the expectation that Aboriginal art be made from natural materials. Certainly Lippards argument that choice of materials is determined by money is applicable to my own practice but her emphasis on the issue of class is not necessarily relevant to all contemporary artists. Brian Jungen and Faith Ringgold who will be discussed later in this thesis, both illustrate the effectiveness of inexpensive and mass produced objects to make art.

Lippard explains some of the history of inexpensive materials when she writes "craftspeople from William Morris to the Russian constructivists have dreamed of social utopias where everyone's life is improved by the cheap and beautiful objects and environments" (128). The idea of inexpensive and beautiful objects is critical to my current practice as the majority of my materials are bought at fabric and dollar stores. The use of bright colours and cartoons is also influenced by the fact that I grew up in the 1980s. My clothes were bright and neon coloured and I was immersed in the pop culture of cartoons. The colours of My Little Pony, Carebears, Strawberry Shortcake and Rainbow Brite entirely surrounded me, as the characters were on my clothes, blankets, lunchbox, knapsack, and toys. Although my son favours Toy Story, Dora the Explorer, and

Diego, I am once again saturated with cartoons. I am drawn to the materials I am surrounded by as a mother, including cartoons and quilts (I was given several handmade blankets when my son was born).

Becoming a mother has had the greatest impact on my studies and art production. The week before I started the Masters program at Emily Carr, my partner Edson was unexpectedly ordered to return to Mexico until his Permanent Resident papers are approved by Immigration Canada. He has not been able to return to Canada for the past nineteen months. Our son Ethan was two years and six months when his dad left and is now four years old. Being a single mother and having the full responsibility for raising Ethan has had a huge impact on my experience with school, including financial difficulty and time-management. There is no daycare available at Emily Carr and a lack of affordable daycare in Vancouver means I rely on babysitters. I miss a lot of artist talks, and I can not spend everyday in the studio like my classmates. Most of the time I work from home, obviously not ideal, as there is not the space and Ethan is very distracting. All these factors have forced me to change my work and methods drastically. My materials have to be child safe, they have to be portable, and affordable. This is my new context and methodology.

Motherhood has also led me to explore arts and handicrafts that are a continuation of women's work. It has become a necessity within the past year to create art that can be produced at home. Another motivation is that I also want to

reflect on the experience of being an Aboriginal female without using representations of the body. Sherry Farrell Racette writes that Canadian Native female artists 'seem to gravitate towards specific genres, particularly performance, photography, and film" (Fierce 49). Certainly my earlier performative and photographic work, such as *Self-portrait as my mother Theresa Joan Sound 1956-1987* was influenced by such Aboriginal female artists. I have since become more interested in exploring material culture.

Chapter 6 Fancy Dancing, Fabric, and Feminism



Figure.6: *Fancy Dancing* Installation View. Lois Klassen and Michelle Sound Perich. Photo, Karen Garrett De Luna. Used by permission of the artists.

In the November 2010 *Fancy Dancing* (figure 6) exhibition at 1612 gallery a sense of loss and dislocation was explored. I collaborated with fellow MAA student Lois Klassen in an investigation of our childhood experiences and memories of Pow-wows. Klassen reflected on her Mennonite background in Saskatchewan and her family's history of attending Pow-wows at the nearby Ojibway and Cree Peguis reserve. While I often attended Pow-wows as a child and teenager, my work did not illustrate my past experiences, but instead imagined a not too distant future.

The history of dance and Pow-wows on the prairies, where both our families are from, is oppressive. An amendment in 1895 gave Indian agents on the prairies the authority to suppress the grass dance, Pow-wows, and giveaways. Dancing was viewed by the government as a direct opposition to their planned transformation of Aboriginal people into a class of skilled servants, labourers, and farmers (Racette, Looking 295). A 1914 amendment made it illegal for any "Indian person" to make public appearances and take part in any dance, performance, or stampede "in aboriginal costume" without the permission of the Indian agent (Racette, Looking 295). An exception to this amendment was that Aboriginals were encouraged and permitted to perform and dance at Anglo-settler events such as Banff Days and the Calgary Stampede. The clothing that was made and the crafts created "provided women with a rare artistic and cultural outlet during an oppressive time..." (Racette, Looking 298). The connection between dance, clothing, and loss on the prairies was explored in the exhibition

from different perspectives and experiences. With all the conflict and change surrounding Pow-wows, the exhibition was also a celebration of its survival and potential.

The installation included *Dances with Care Bears*, a storefront window display of a collection of dreamcatchers bought at dollar stores, archival family portraits, two wallpapered enlargements of 1960s Pow-wows, a Pow-wow dance circle made of Astro-turf and several quilts. Through her *Comforter Art Action* series Klassen frequently collaborates with others to make patchwork quilts that are distributed to refugee camps. Klassen taught me how to construct a child sized variation of a Star quilt as I had no previous sewing experience. I wanted to further explore the notion of hybridity using forms that were not originally identified as being Aboriginal and I began to research Native star quilts because they were introduced by Anglo-settlers but gained meaning over time for Aboriginal people.

I am attracted to Native quilts as they are a hybridized form that has been appropriated by Native women for their own purposes. In *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions* Marsha MacDowell outlines the history of Aboriginal quilting. The art of quilt making was introduced by European women in the nineteenth century but utilized pre-existing sewing with sinew techniques where small animal bones were used as needles and animal sinew as thread. Sewing

and quilt making were also taught to young girls in mission and residential schools (MacDowell 5). Quilts continue to be used in Aboriginal communities to honour others in naming ceremonies, to protect the drum in Pow-wows, or celebrate a birth, or other rites of passage ceremonies. Beyond their utilitarian and ceremonial functions Native women began to create quilts that were used to “convey a sense of identity” The colours and designs used in the quilts can have either specific tribal meanings or pan-Indian meanings. While star blankets were introduced by non-Natives in the form of the “Texas” lone star quilt, they were adapted into star patterns made from small diamond shapes instead of a small trapezoid design. The depiction of stars was already present in pre-contact artistic practices, such as drawings on buffalo hides, and reflects a continuation of old imagery in new materials (MacDowell 5).

Unlike dreamcatchers, quilts have not been complicated by over-commercialization. Like *Dances with Care Bears* my (Untitled) Native Star Quilt combines Aboriginal and pop culture imagery. The quilt features the colors of the four directions, red, black, white and yellow overlaid with a star design made from fabric patterned with cartoon characters (figure 7). The back is a full size image of Disney’s Sleeping Beauty printed on polar fleece.



Fig.7: Michelle Sound Perich, *(Untitled) Star Quilt*, detail, 2010. Fabric, approx. 45"x 65". Photo: by artist. Used by permission of the artist.

My work complicates the relationship between quilts and honor or ceremony and emphasizes contemporary experience and the fusion of often conflicting worldviews that Aboriginal people negotiate. The concept of living in “two worlds” reflected the experience of many Aboriginals who lived within their own communities but were increasingly altered by Anglo-settler influence. Lamar argues that this dichotomy no longer represents the variety of Native experiences that include “many connections to different places, families, cultures, religions, languages, (and) beliefs...” (4). As Pueblo artist Eliza Naranjo Morse further

states “There are not two worlds. There is just one world I’m living in” (4). My star quilt can be viewed as a visual representation of this rejection of ‘walking in two worlds’ and instead affirms the idea of a multi-vocal contemporary experience.

In her essay, *Text and textiles: weaving across the borderlines*, textile artist and critic Janis Jeffries further suggests that the relationship between hybrid forms and textiles forces

a dislocation with old forms in order to make explicit old and new meanings. Consequently, hybrid forms eclectically appropriate or replace, quote and parody, contaminate and are contaminated by ‘other’ traditions, languages, and gender inscriptions which are in an uneasy and playfully, willful relationship to the situation of postmodernism (166).

Jefferies discusses feminism in relation to artists who create new non-traditional forms using textiles. Throughout history textile work has been perceived as labour-intensive, slow and pain staking and yet is devalued as invisible woman’s work (164). Jeffries cites art critic and theorist Rosalind Krauss who argues that “the production of hybrid forms overcomes and undermines gender inscriptions of existing cultural languages...” (166). This is evident in the star blankets where an Anglo-settler tradition of women quilting became a means for Aboriginal women to visually represent and continue traditional beliefs.

According to Jeffries the mobilities of fabric are related to ideas of 'femininity as masquerade' which upset the idea of the singular to encompass fractured, multiple, and precarious identities (164). The idea of fractured identities is also represented in the star quilt, not only with the combination of Aboriginal and pop culture imagery, but in the fractured images that make up the star. As I began cutting and arranging the patterns for the star design I selected cartoon fabrics as the largest pieces and then explored options with the arrangement based on colour composition, alternating the purples and pinks for example. I also attempted to ensure that two pieces that featured Disney princesses were not side by side and were as evenly distributed as possible. The second row of diamond pieces was a blue "Indian" bear cartoon. The third and smallest diamond pieces were cartoons which I again arranged by colour with the intention of separating the Disney princesses. The overall effect of the quilt is to emphasize a personal and fragmented narrative that reflects my Aboriginal identity, my childhood icons and my role as a mother.

African-American artist Faith Ringgold's work speaks to my own process in terms of materials; textiles, beads, feathers, and a desire to understand traditional arts that are related to culture, narrative and identity. Ringgold's use of appropriation, pattern, sewing, history, personal narrative, African-American and European-American artistic and cultural forms, rich textiles, and gorgeous colors, are described as "a transgressive hybrid if ever there was one" (Farrington 1).

Ringgold's artistic practice has relevance to my work as she creates "story quilts" (figure 8) which often combine representations of historical figures with her own family and written texts that are based on her family's oral storytelling tradition (Auther 116). Her choice of materials is similar to my own as "she gravitated to materials like feathers, beads, sequins, and brocaded fabrics, despite the very real possibility that her works might be perceived as "low" rather than "high" art" (Farrington 66). Ringgold helped to lead both the black and feminist art movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Farrington 4). Her work is often included in the pattern and decoration movement which sought to deconstruct the modernist and minimalist art works that marginalized decorative art. "Turning to a method traditionally associated with 'women's work,'" Ringgold was able to affirm her womanhood" (Farrington 66). Ringgold saw a link between her materials, the quilt and her identity as a member of a global family of women who quilt (70).

Auther quotes a 1975 interview where Ringgold stated:

I don't want to be placed in the bag where I think all art is about making something that nobody can move. making some big, monumental, monolithic thing that I can't even afford to do... Feminist art is soft art, lightweight art, sewing art. This is the contribution women have made that is uniquely theirs (105).

Ringgold stressed that she was a painter working in the medium of the quilt and the insistence on her work as painting illustrates the difficulty feminist artists faced in the creation of hybrid objects as a critique of art world boundaries or

hierarchies (Author 7). Her rejection of boundaries between art and craft was a rejection of Western and patriarchal definitions of art that limited her access to artistic traditions important to her identity as an African-American woman and artist (115). Ringgold's grandmother and great-grandmother were quilters; and she often collaborated with her mother, a seamstress, in the production of her 'story quilts.' Ringgold's work could be viewed as a continuation of her family traditions while mine is concerned with an attempt to make cultural connections that were lost to me.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Fig.8: Faith Ringgold. *Bitter Nest #5: The Homecoming* .1988 Acrylic on canvas, tie-dyed, pieced fabric border, 76 x 96".

I have had to research and attain these skills as I had no experience with quilt making or crafting traditional Aboriginal art. Through workshops at Emily

Carr's Aboriginal Gathering Place I have been introduced to the art and technology of drum-making, beadwork, moose hair tufting, and cedar basketry. These experiences have taught me new skills while connecting me with the Aboriginal community at Emily Carr. It has also allowed me to identify new associations within my practice, such as the similarity between the vivid synthetic pom poms used in *Dances with Care Bears* and the pom poms created for moose hair tufting.

Chapter 7 Narrative Threads

My mother recalls that not everyone created beadwork or moccasins and that it was only those “who had an artistic knack, you had to be gifted.”

Preparation for beadwork was time-consuming, in terms of tanning the hides, waiting for the catalogue order of beads, and finally executing the beadwork design. Racette emphasizes the important role that Aboriginal women played within their communities as “the major focus of women’s energies was the preparation of furs and hides and the construction of clothing for their families” (Looking 286). These women clothed their families, negotiated change and contributed to the economic survival of their communities.

My great-kokum tanned skins and made moccasins for her family and also possibly for sale, but she also took the time to create decorative beadwork.

Sherry Farrell Racette recognizes the connection between the act of art making and cultural survival when she writes about;

the extraordinary beauty of much of the material, often
created during times of duress and change reflects
the power of the creative process to provide respite in
times of trouble and the enduring ability of women to
create sacred moments through artistic expression.

(Looking 306)

I can only speculate as to why my great-kokum wanted to bead. It may have given her some private space or been meditative and I would like to believe she felt a creative need and that we are connected by this mutual experience.

Racette describes a similar desire when researching centuries old Aboriginal clothing, “I imagined a long invisible thread that stretched across the centuries and connected the thread in my needles to the fine strands of sinew used by the unknown women who lived long ago (Looking 285).

Growing up in Kinuso, Alberta my mother, Elizabeth Perich, remembers watching her kokum tan hides to make moccasins that she would later add beadwork to; however, her kokum, Julienne Courtoreille, was unable to pass on these skills to any of her children or grandchildren. My kokum, Della Sound, was sent to a residential school where she was unable to learn traditional skills from her mother and family. As Racette points out, like so many girls she was removed from her home and community

Residential schools removed girls from the teaching circles of older, more experienced artists. Excellence in traditional art forms typically relies on opportunities throughout childhood to observe, play, help, and engage in mentoring relationships with experienced artists [...] and how to harvest materials (Looking 294).

Sam Sound, my moosum (grandfather), was also raised in a residential school and later signed away his treaty rights so that his children would not be sent to residential school. As a result of signing away his treaty they had to leave the reserve and move to Edmonton and Lethbridge for work. They were taught English and forbidden from speaking Cree in the residential school and although they continued to speak Cree as adults they did not teach it to any of their children. The loss of traditional language and dislocation from family and community also affected sewing and creating. These have been lost for three generations and my work is a venue for me to acknowledge the loss.

I produced the series *Fluid* for the March 2010 Graduate student exhibition *Killer Texts*. It consists of four pieces, eight by ten inches each, which combined family snapshots with text featuring both family stories and legal histories. One image of my kokum (grandmother) and moosum (grandfather) is juxtaposed with a section of The Indian Act listing the offence of selling liquor to an Indian (Figure 9). It states “...If the appearance and language of the purchaser is such as should reasonably cause suspicion that the latter is a “treaty” Indian, the liquor dealer is not excused because he thought the purchaser was a halfbreed...”



It is not essential to the offence, under the Indian Act, sec. 135, of selling liquor to an Indian, for the accused to have known at the time of sale that the purchaser was an Indian; and if the appearance and language of the purchaser is such as should reasonably cause suspicion that the latter is a "treaty" Indian, the liquor dealer is not excused because he thought the purchaser was a half-breed and sold to him without further enquiry.

Figure: 9. Michelle Sound Perich, *Fluid*. 2010. Photo and Inkjet print on paper. 8"x10". Photo: by artist. Used by permission of the artist.

Another image is a snapshot of my mom, Elizabeth Perich and her husband Mike Perich and the text explains that he was Yugoslavian/Croatian and she is Cree. He could often not purchase alcohol because they thought he was “Indian” but they would sell to my mom because they thought she was Chinese. Another piece features a snapshot of my family and a story relating how my father would tell my mother not to speak Cree because “You’re in Canada, speak English.”

I am currently producing a series of artworks that further explore my family and cultural history. While researching my genealogy on the internet I discovered the Métis database, which contains records of both the Canadian census and Métis scrip applications. I have found records from both my mother’s and father’s families. The interview of Julianne Courtoreille which introduced this thesis was also found online. She says that her ancestors never told her much, which she unfortunately repeated with her grandchildren. The story she tells about her early life was completely unknown to my family. She died two years before I was born, but I often heard stories about her. My mother would tell me that Julianne was a healer, that she knew a lot about traditional plant medicine and delivered most of the babies born in Kinuso, Alberta. Most of her grandchildren are grandparents themselves and are the only people who have any memories of her. Through letters, facebook, telephone conversations, and personal visits I have recently starting gathering stories and facts about her from her grandchildren.

For the March 2011 Emily Carr University Aboriginal student exhibit *Grand Entry* I have enlarged her census record and the first page of her interview to approximately three feet by four feet (figures 10 and 11). I overlaid the census record with brightly coloured post-it notes that record the stories I have collected. Some stories were handwritten by ---and others that were told to me during telephone conversations I have written. Julianne's interview is important as Racette writes that "women's voices are often conspicuously absent from historic documents, women have left few written records of their lives" (285). My great-grandmother's words were translated from Cree to English and while I do not have access to the original audio recording, I believe there are a number of inaccuracies throughout the written text. For example it is written that she says the word "ain't" although there is no Cree word equivalent. Her statement "there ain't" would be translated in Cree as êkamâ, "there isn't". Based on information my family can provide I highlight these inaccuracies and make corrections using a red marker directly on the photocopy enlargement of her interview.

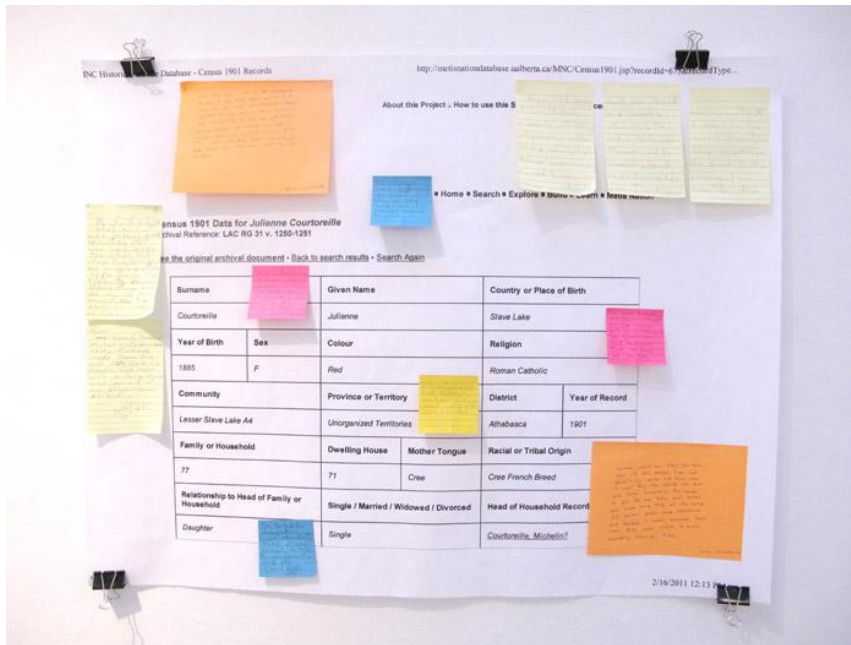


Figure.10: Michelle Sound Perich. *Searching*, detail. 2011. Inkjet and Post-it notes on paper. 3'x4'. Photo by artist. Used by permission of artist.

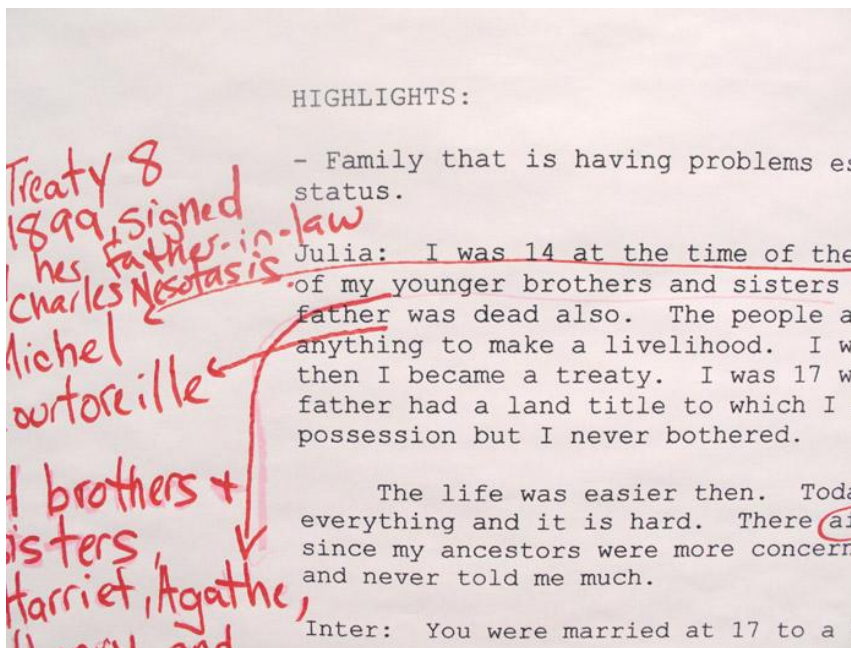


Figure.11: Michelle Sound Perich. *Searching*, detail. 2011. Inkjet and marker on paper. 4'x3'. Photo by artist. Used by permission of artist.

The census record and interview of my great kokum are two very different records, one that attempted to categorize her and another that allowed her to define herself. Racette states the importance of “connecting to archival records, the oral tradition and embedded knowledge within First Nations languages (that) greatly enriches our capacity to understand the stories these objects have to tell” (Looking 285). The census records of my family reflect the language and government politics of the time. The records are from the 1901 and 1906 census and my mother’s paternal great- kokum Theresa Giroux is listed as Colour: Red, Religion: Roman Catholic, Racial or Tribal Origin: Cree French Breed, Mother Tongue: Cree. Other ancestors are listed as Indian, Halfbreed, unknown Indian.

I plan to print individual census records on printed fabric and construct a patchwork quilt. (figure12). The fabric used will look historic, reminiscent of the time period that the records were collected. In my work I want to bring forth hidden and lost histories that expand and critique government records. My work is recuperation through record keeping (internet sources, interviews) and personal memories. I am interested in learning craft and technical skills to discover a lost history, I have experimented with making traditional Aboriginal arts and also learned basic sewing and quilting. In the beginning of my thesis research I wanted to distance myself from my personal and family experiences and make work that was more playful, yet I find that I have come full circle and am again looking at myself and my history. While these explorations

are valuable to me, they are also important in a wider context. If the stories, facts, and knowledge are lost to me, they are also lost and unknown to you. The stories of my great-kokum, my moosum, and my mother should not only be told and recorded, but heard.

[the original archival document](#) - [Back to search results](#) - [Search Again](#)

Surname		Given Name		Country or Place of Birth	
Groux		Theresa		Slave Lake	
Year of Birth	Sex	Colour	Religion		
1907	F	Red	Roman Catholic		
Community		Province or Territory		District	Year of
Lesser Slave Lake A4		Unorganized Territories		Athabasca	1901
Family or Household		Dwelling House	Mother Tongue	Racial or Tribal Origin	
82		76	Cree	Cree French Breed	
Relationship to Head of Family or Household		Single / Married / Widowed / Divorced		Head of Household, Recd	
Daughter		Single		Groux, Louis	

Fig 12: Michelle Sound Perich, work in progress, Untitled Census Quilt, 2011. Fabric and ink. Dimensions unknown. Photo: by artist. Used by permission of the artist.

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